

7 wicked popes, and the terrible things they did

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You may have noticed that Pope Francis is in the United States. The pontiff's arrival in Washington shut down streets, led to throngs of adoring crowds and a giddy reception from President Obama. He is cast by some as a transformational figure, [a "liberal" custodian](#) of the Holy See and an important [moral voice](#) on some of the world's most pressing political and social issues.

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Of course, in the 2,000-year history of the Vatican, not all its popes have been as celebrated or righteous. There have been usurpers, [greedy spendthrifts](#) and [warmongers](#). For centuries, the papacy was at the center of European power politics — and those who wore its mantle acted with fitting ruthlessness. Here's a brief sampling of some of the worst popes in history.

Pope Alexander VI: A Spanish-born pontiff from the powerful Borgia family, Pope Alexander VI was infamous for his libertine behavior and nepotism. The latter was unsurprising — after all, his uncle was Pope Callixtus III, who had paved the way for Alexander's eventual ascension. Alexander was pope between 1492 and 1503. The intrigues, orgies and skulduggery that took place during his pontificate were enough to lead to [a recent Showtime TV series](#), which reveled in the debaucheries and conspiracies of the Borgia family. Suggestions persist to this day that Alexander engaged in incest with his daughter, Lucrezia. When he died, his body [rapidly decomposed and bloated](#), leading to suspicions of poisoning.

Pope Stephen VI: Also referred to in some sources as Stephen VII, he began his brief tenure as pope in 896 with a grisly spectacle. He had the body of his predecessor, Pope Formosus, dug up and put on trial for blasphemy. Formosus's real crime had been his allegiance to a different faction in the halls of power.

"The corpse was provided with a council," details [one historian's account](#), "who wisely remained silent while Pope Stephen raved and screamed his insults at it." The moldering body was then [stripped of its sacred vestments](#), three fingers on its right hand were hacked off and what was left of the corpse was dragged through the streets of Rome and dumped into the Tiber river. Stephen, though, didn't last long; he was strangled to death by his own enemies the following year.

Pope John XII: He was pope from 955 until his apparently untimely death in 964 (more about that below in a moment) and had a rather foul reputation. According to the [Catholic Encyclopedia](#), he was "a coarse, immoral man, whose life was such that the Lateran was spoken of as a brothel, and the moral corruption in Rome became the subject of general odium." He was eventually accused of perjury, simony (selling of ecclesiastical lands and privileges for his own fortune) and other crimes and was briefly deposed before sweeping back to power in a bloody purge. John's death was curious: He was apparently killed by a man who had found the pope in bed with his wife, in the midst of committing adultery.

Pope Urban VI: He presided over [a major schism](#) in the Roman Catholic Church in 1378, which resulted in the emergence of parallel feuding papacies that lasted nearly four decades. Urban was supposedly prone to violent outbursts; later on, he caught wind of [a conspiracy to depose him](#) and had six cardinals arrested, tortured and ultimately executed. Legend has it he [complained](#) to the torturers that the cardinals' screams were not loud enough.

Pope Benedict IX: A remarkably cynical pope, Benedict held the position on three separate occasions in the 11th century; in one instance, he actually resigned and [sold the papacy](#) to another priest. Known for his supposedly licentious behavior, Benedict was [described](#) by a later 11th century pope as having a life "so vile, so foul, so execrable, that I shudder to think of it."

Pope Leo X: A scion of the powerful Medici family of Florence, Leo had his talents and was a patron of the arts but is remembered most for his lavish spendthrift habits in the years he was pope, between 1513 and 1521. His emptying of the Vatican's coffers led to various measures to create more revenue, which included the sale of indulgences — in effect, guarantees of relief from damnation in the afterlife. This practice infuriated a certain German contemporary of Leo, [Martin Luther](#), and planted the seeds of the Protestant Reformation.

Pope Boniface VIII: Here is the archetypal power-hungry pope, who in 1302 issued [a papal bull](#) decreeing it "absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff." This was perhaps the most aggressive indication yet from a pope that temporal matters — the conquests of lands, the collection of riches — mattered as much as those of the spirit. He waged wars, sacked cities and eventually lost his own game of thrones, defeated by an army of his enemies.

Boniface VIII makes an appearance in the "Divine Comedy" of Italian poet Dante Alighieri, who places him in the eighth circle for hell for his [many years of simony](#), a crime that in Dante's schema was worse than sodomy. In his comic work "Gargantua and Pantagruel," 16th century French writer Francois Rabelais also relegated Boniface to hell, where the sinning pope [is consigned](#) to "skimming the scum off soup pots."

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